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Under the Mask: Non-Normative Sexuality in Alan Moore's *Watchmen*

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The superhero genre has a long history of presenting ensembles of characters that serve as a bastion of masculinity and heteronormativity. Within conventional comic book universes, the most popular of which being DC and Marvel, characters like Batman would never have erectile dysfunction, Wonder Woman would never be murdered for loving other women, Captain America would never impregnate and disregard a woman he met in a war overseas, and Superman would never be shown having any sort of sexual hang-up. Amidst the resurgence of superhero narratives featuring normative performances of sexuality that was dubbed silver era of comics, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' 1987 *Watchmen* compilation has been said to act as a modernist deconstruction of the comic book/graphic novel medium and the tropes associated with it. One critic posits that *Watchmen* deploys a "blend of aspirational realism and formal experimentation that makes *Watchmen* a key participant in what we might call, with some degree of specificity, the modernist moment in comics history" (Hoberek 30). As a deconstruction of the superhero genre, *Watchmen*'s masked adventurers complicate definitions of heroism and superhero tropes, especially the sexuality of the hero.

The modernist poetics of *Watchmen*, including paneling, color, symbolism, and image resonances, characterize *Watchmen* as a unique work, while also riffing on the typical tropes of a graphic novel or comic book. *Watchmen* presents a style of paneling and art that imitates the conventions of the graphic novel medium while simultaneously reinventing them. Moore's graphic novel is composed of twelve chapters of graphic content accompanied by several pages of prose literature per chapter, and breaks genre conventions by depicting superheroes with non-normative and deviant sexualities. Moreover, donning a mask and costume enables characters to explore avenues of sexuality not previously accessible to them: Rorschach uses his alter ego to shut himself off from any sexual desire, Sally Jupiter/Juspezyk uses the guise of Silk Spectre to fulfil a desire for male attention, Edward

Blake uses the guise of the Comedian to fulfil an often sexual desire for violence, Dan Dreiberg overcomes his erectile dysfunction with the confidence he gains in assuming the role of Nite Owl, and Jon Osterman loses desire over time because he is alienated from his own body as he is stuck in his Doctor Manhattan form. In each case, the alter ego of the superhero is psychologically significant to the character, even to the point of overshadowing their identity out of costume. Numerous *Watchmen* characters publicly allege non-normative sexual characteristics among masked crime-fighters, which causes a firmly anti-queer fictional public to ultimately reject masked heroism outright. This break between superhero and adoring public presents another way in which *Watchmen* diverges from the conventions of a typical superhero narrative.

Queer theory applies to *Watchmen* insofar as performing the role of a costumed hero allows certain characters to enact personal kinks. In this paper, any expression of sexuality that challenges social and cultural norms, including homosexuality, qualifies as queer. Phenomenological queer theory is a term that describes the interactions between phenomena or image and the phenomenological orientation of the individual. Elements of a character's heroic costume often symbolize traits of the costume's wearer, and changes in a character's costume are accordingly relevant to that character's development. For example, Walter Kovaks feels more comfortable in his Rorschach costume and persona, and the costume's black-and-white mask represents his narrow, black-and-white worldview. Also, although the three primary colors are used sparingly in *Watchmen*, a rare abundance of blue characterizes Doctor Manhattan's appearance, which reflects both his abundance of agency, and his mystic, otherworldliness. Donning a mask and costume presents a phenomenological change to a character's image, which is coded to represent a change in the phenomenological orientation towards sexual and romantic desire of some characters. Thus, any transformation in a character's image—an alteration to or from costume or in some physical aspect of the

costume—can change the character’s internalized persona and/or phenomenological orientation.

The universe that Alan Moore creates for the *Watchmen* series is an alternative history where the presence of superheroes changes the events of the War in Vietnam, Cold War, and numerous other parts of American history. The *Watchmen* characters that are prominently featured in the novel are the second generation of superheroes, with the main events of the story taking place over the course of two and a half weeks in 1985. Thereby, the first generation of characters serve to enrich audience understandings of the world through flashbacks and prose literature excerpts. Out of the original eight heroes, an ensemble called the Minutemen, three read as marked homosexual: Hooded Justice, Captain Metropolis, and The Silhouette. Two other minutemen members, Silk Spectre and the Comedian are arguably queer, or non-normative in their sexual drives, and function as a queer couple. The prominence of non-normative sexual tendencies among first generation heroes establishes a backdrop for queer superheroes and a performative queer element to masked crime-fighting.

Perhaps the most notable commentator on the queer nature of costumed heroics is the character Hollis Mason, who alleges sexual deviancy amongst his masked colleagues in his book, “Under the Hood,” five chapters of which are featured in three installments alongside the first three issues of *Watchmen*. Mason acted as the first Nite Owl, and Mason’s acts of heroism inspire Dan Dreiberg to don the Nite Owl mantle after Mason’s retirement. As a member of the original minutemen, Mason is familiar with the practice of masked heroism as well as his costumed peers, and his book can be seen to have support from the ethos of his character both in and out of the *Watchmen* universe. Addressing the public’s opinion of vigilantes, Mason writes:

They’ve called us fascists and they’ve called us perverts and while there’s an element of truth in both those accusations, neither of them are big enough to

take in the whole picture... we were crazy, we were kinky, we were Nazis, all those things that people say, [but,] we did too much good in our respective communities to be written off as a mere aberration, whether social or sexual or psychological. (Moore, "Under the Hood," 8)

Here, Mason's counterargument to anti-vigilante sentiment counts non-normative sexuality as a public image problem comparable to fascism. In *Watchmen's* style of realism, superheroes equate to public figures as they face the scrutiny for their words and actions in the public eye. Mason may be contributing to the superhero image problem, as his book recounts racist statements made by Captain Metropolis, Hooded Justice's sympathies for the Nazi party, the infamous rape of Silk Spectre Sally Jupiter by Comedian Edward Blake, and a handful of other unsavory details about masked heroes. "Under the Hood" also discusses the idea that heroes share personality traits that compel them to fight crime, and although he claims he doesn't know what those traits are, he implies that masked heroism is informed by some combination of altruism and deviancy. In *Watchmen's* universe, it is those who are forced to the outside of society, such as queer peoples and individuals with radical political ideologies, that would see the most that they wanted to change in society, and are most compelled to be radicalized into vigilantism. Unfortunately for the vigilantes, this evident sexual and political radicalism invites criticism and hate from their would-be supporters.

Larry Schexnayder, public relations specialist for the Minutemen, maintains enough control over the public image of the group to ensure the survival of their reputation in the public eye. However, Schexnayder's means of avoiding bad publicity highlight the prevalent homophobia in the fictitious world. The Silhouette, a first-generation lesbian heroine, was removed from the minutemen for fear of bad press, which "underscores the manner in which society demands that sex, gender, and sexuality all match up with what society considers normal," according to "Watchwomen," an essay from *Watchmen and Philosophy* (Donovan

and Richardson 177). The abrupt and disgraceful expulsion of the Silhouette demonstrates that public outcry in *Watchmen* is firmly anti-gay and anti-queer. According to Hollis Mason's "Under the Hood," "some of us did have our sexual hang-ups. Everybody knows what eventually became of the Silhouette, [which] provides proof for those who need it that for some people dressing up in costume did have its more libidinous elements" (Moore, "Under the Hood," 8). The Silhouette was a homosexual woman, but Mason implies that her sexuality may be tied to her alter ego as well.

The Silhouette suffered for coming out of the closet, but the other two marked homosexual minutemen have a chance to remain in the closet and avoid the repercussions of coming out. In another essay from *Watchmen and Philosophy* titled "Hooded Justice and Captain Metropolis: The Ambiguously Gay Duo," Robert Arp discusses the implied homosexual couple in the first generation of heroes. Although Arp claims that Hooded Justice and Captain Metropolis are ambiguously gay, the pair are indicated to be homosexual in a letter to minuteman Sally Juspezyk from her publicity agent and later husband, Larry Schexnayder. Published alongside *Watchmen's* ninth installment, this letter shows that Juspezyk was helping to cover for the secret homosexual relationship between H.J. (Hooded Justice) and Nelson "Nelly" Gardner (Captain Metropolis), two of her fellow minutemen. Expressing his concern for bad publicity, Schexnayder writes, "Nelly called last night, upset over yet another tiff with H.J. Those two are getting worse. The more they row and act like an old married couple in public, the harder they are to cover for" (Moore, Ch. IX., 31). Arp argues that the sexuality of this duo, although closeted for fear of bad publicity, disrupts heteronormativity to a heightened degree because of the implied masculinity in the role of superhero. With his comment, "I'm basically uncomfortable with the gay lifestyle," Arp acknowledges a bias against non-normative sexuality (Arp 186). According to Arp, Hooded Justice having the physicality of a wrestler is evidently emasculating to the straight reader

because the characters are portrayed as “real men” in a stereotypical superhero style (Arp 185). Captain Metropolis acted as leader to the minutemen and wears a costume that resembles Superman, the typical leader of DC’s Justice League team, which positions him in a traditionally incorruptible role.



Pictured left to right: Janie Slater, Doctor Manhattan, Captain Metropolis, Silk Spectre II, Ozymandias, The Comedian (above), Nite Owl II (below), and Rorschach (Moore, Ch. II, 9)

Gardner also served as a lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps, another profession traditionally perceived to be masculine. If the implied masculinity of two comic book characters is making a homophobic essayist uncomfortable, then there must be something legitimately subversive about their sexuality.

In a news article featuring Silk Spectre, her fake relationship with Hooded Justice is publicly teased out and sensationalized. The reporter goes as far as to ask, “Can wedding bells be too far away?” (Moore, Ch. IX, 29). This shows that the fictitious public is desperate for the same kind of heteronormativity in costumed adventurers that we find in traditional real-world superhero narratives. Although the public wants to see him as heteronormative, Hooded Justice’s very costume appears to be referential to bondage. In fact, the public is so disenchanted with superheroes that pirate narratives become the dominant comic book narrative in the *Watchmen* universe. Finally, after two generations of suspecting queer drives behind public heroes, citizens turn on the masked adventurers, taking to rioting in the streets against the masked heroic figures.

The fictitious public’s perception of masked adventurers is crucial to understanding *Watchmen*’s alternative history, and the actions of the first generation of heroes influences the public’s enduring perception of vigilantes from any generation. Although the origins of the police strike in the story are unclear, the public took to the streets in 1977 when faced with the reality of having masked crusaders as a primary means of law enforcement. This provides a glimpse of how the public really feels about the so-called masks, and could not be clearer than when one rioter exclaims, “we don’t want vigilantes! We want regular cops!” (Moore Ch. II, 17). Although to be fair, public opinion of masked crime fighting is at an all-time low at this point in time, but the comments of civilians in the riot are overall derogatory. Nite Owl Dan Dreiberg and the Comedian Edward Blake are called “faggots,” and Doctor Manhattan is called a “big blue fruit” as they try to get the riots to disperse:



(Moore, Ch. II, 17; Ch. IV, 22).

Even if the main characters are unaware of a reason for their predisposition towards sexual deviancy, the fictitious public is keenly aware, although they are disposed to ridicule. People fear what they do not understand, and queer masked crime fighters are easily more controversial than non-queer heroes. It is also during these riots that the graffiti on a wall reads, “WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN,” the only time someone refers to costumed crime-fighters as “watchmen” (Moore Ch. II, 18). By titling the novel *Watchmen*, Moore indicates the legitimacy of the claims of the riot crowd, that Dreiberg, Blake, Manhattan, and others are indeed queer.

As publicist for the Minutemen, Schexnayder was integral to the foundation of the group, and allowed Juspechzyk the opportunity to accumulate vast amounts of money and

good publicity. As an attractive female public figure who presents herself in a sexual light, the public had a very easy time sexualizing Juspeczyk. This desire to be desired is displayed prominently when a now elderly Juspeczyk receives a Tijuana bible, a porn booklet, starring a younger version of herself. Although Laurie, her adult daughter, is disgusted with the content of this book, Sally says she finds it flattering, and even gives it to Dan Dreiberg in one of the final scenes of *Watchmen* (Moore, Ch. II, 4; Ch. XII, 29). Sally is only ever shown to be delighted when desire is shown towards her, and her super-sexual impulse is undeniably queer. “Watchwomen” characterizes Sally Juspeczyk as presenting “hypersexualized feminine style while acting out hypermasculine aggressive social behavior,” which Juspeczyk owns, and uses to her own benefit (Donovan and Richardson 176). Juspeczyk was the only female member of the minutemen after the expulsion of the Silhouette, which shows Juspeczyk’s ability to employ masculine as well as femininity social strategies, such as fighting criminals and belonging to the Minutemen, an otherwise homosocial group. Juspeczyk’s freedom and ability to capitalize on the budding superhero craze in a way that defies the societal norms for women characterizes a distinct feminist quality to her persona.

Silk Spectre survives a violent attempted rape at the hands of the Comedian, shown in a flashback in *Watchmen*’s second chapter, to which Juspeczyk has a unique psychological response. Although Juspeczyk is initially furious, she is drawn to Edward Blake and engages in consensual sex with him on multiple occasions, resulting in the conception of her daughter and the deterioration of her marriage to Schexnayder. As a veritable sex symbol, Juspeczyk could likely have any man she wanted, yet there was something about the Comedian’s desire for her that resonated with her differently. In an after-the-fact discussion of the attempted rape, she says, “I don’t bear any grudges... What if, just for a moment, maybe I really did want... I mean, that doesn’t excuse him, doesn’t excuse either of us, but with all that doubt, what it is to come to terms with it, I can’t stay angry when I’m so uncertain about my own

feelings” (Moore, Ch. IX, 32). This admission of mixed feelings towards the subject and the Comedian’s sexual history with Sally Juspeczyk elucidate a queer sexuality of rape fetishizing and masochism with respect to her orientation towards Edward Blake’s sexuality.

In addition to Hollis Mason mentioning that the public likes to joke and speculate about the heroes’ sexualities, Mason’s book recounts the incident in which a young Comedian attempts to rape the first Silk Spectre. In an essay titled “The Love of Nationalism, Internationalism, and Sacred Space in *Watchmen*,” from *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore*, Karl Martin discusses Edward Blake’s violent nature with specific reference to the rape scene. Martin notes that Blake is only fifteen when this scene occurs, which, “marks him as a violent teenager willing to take what he wants by force” (Martin 68). This scene starts with both Blake and Jupiter in full costume, and Jupiter later suggests that her hypersexual persona of Silk Spectre may have inadvertently conjured violent sexuality in an immature Blake. This is additionally supported by a picture of the Comedian featured in the installment of “Under the Hood” that follows the chapter containing the rape scene:





*The first Minutemen Christmas party, 1939
(from left to right) The Silhouette, Silk Spectre,
Comedian, Hooded Justice, Captain Metropolis
(in mirror), Nite Owl, Mothman, Dollar Bill*

(Moore, Ch. 2, 5; Under the Hood, 9)

This photograph also visually represents the divide between the marked queer members of the minutemen on the left, and the marked or supposed heteronormative minutemen on the right. Although Juspezyk dismisses the Comedian's inexcusable act of sexual assault, she also alludes to a queer element motivating his actions, as does Martin. It is true that at this point in time Blake was akin to a sidekick, having not yet fully realized the extent of his non-normative sexuality nor having found an outlet for it.

Blake later found his outlet for violence in fighting overseas for the American government. As he comes of age, the Comedian also undergoes a costume change from clownish yellow with a purple mask to all black with red, white, and blue star and stripes insignias on his respective shoulder, which indicates his favorable orientation towards the United States government. Mason comments, "it almost seemed as if [the Comedian] were being groomed into some sort of patriotic symbol" (Moore, "Under the Hood," 11). His name "Blake" indicates both the color black as representative of his morality, and the poet William Blake, who is known for his sensualism. William Blake is quoted in *Watchmen*, which evidences that Moore intends this parallel. This affirms that the Comedian's initial clownish

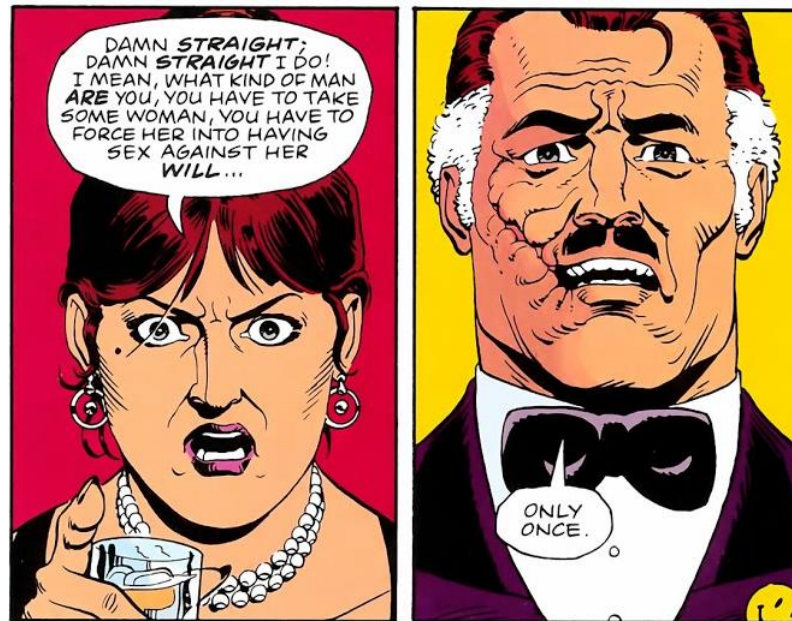
irreverence towards society has been tempered into a dark reflection of the American dream, as he suggests to the second Nite Owl during the police riots:



(Moore, Ch. II, 18)

Blake also wears a yellow button, which implies that he still holds his clownish irreverence, and a leather bondage-inspired mask, which indicates the queer and fetishizing nature of his alternate persona.

Blake endures a complicated relationship with Sally Jupiter and Laurie Juspecky, and is ultimately successful at winning the forgiveness of Sally Jupiter. In fact, later instances of fondness between Blake and Jupiter evidence that the pair functions as a queer couple within the text. After Edward Blake's death, Jupiter says, "poor Eddie... things change. What happened, happened forty years ago ... It's history," and Sally Juspecky's final appearance in *Watchmen* shows her crying and planting a kiss over the face of the Comedian in a picture of the minutemen – the very picture after which Blake immediately attempted to rape Juspecky (Moore, Ch. II, 1). Also, later instances of consensual sex between the two are implied in Blake's finale interaction with Laurie Juspecky, his daughter:



(Moore, Ch. 9, 21)

The fond regard that Silk Spectre Sally Jupiter and Comedian Edward Blake hold for one another demonstrates that the pair are favorably oriented towards each other, and that the pair have compatible sexual identities. Therein, the first Silk Spectre and the Comedian function as a queer couple.

After Blake's retirement, he attempts to establish a relationship with Laurie Juspezyk, with less success than with her mother. It is at this point that Blake discovers that his past sexual violence has made it impossible for him to be a part of the Juspezyk family unit. In a conversation with Laurie after the crimebusters meeting (pictured above), Blake tells her, "you don't look like you grew up too bad," and even asks about her mother, "your mom: she talk about me much?" (Moore, Ch. IX, 15). As Sally Juspezyk is still outraged at Blake, she ends the conversation abruptly when she arrives, pulling Laurie away and rebuffing Blake's attempt to get to know his daughter. In the essay, "What's so Goddamned Funny?" from *Watchmen and Philosophy*, Taneli Kukkonen argues that Blake can also be seen to break his act at several points in the story, and that a later conversation with his daughter is a moment of sincerity. Laurie Juspezyk has read and been influenced by

Mason's "Under the Hood" since her last meeting with Blake, yet is completely unaware that he is her father until after his death. She is enraged at the Comedian for what he did to her mother, and Blake is ultimately unable to live a normative lifestyle because of his abnormal sense of humor. Kukkonen points out the irony of the event that brings them together, a party to honor Blake for his war crimes, because "in the middle of all this, he encounters the one thing in life he could legitimately be proud of, the woman Laurie has grown into" (Kukkonen 203). Blake also bears a scar from his encounter with a woman bearing his unborn daughter in Vietnam to his final interaction with his daughter Laurie, which heightens the irony of the situation. Even for someone with a dark, twisted sense of humor, this culmination of events hurt for Blake. Kukkonen asserts that Juspeczyk's rejection of Blake from the family space "is the one point in Eddie's life when he seems almost ready to let his mask slip" (Kukkonen 202-203). For someone who sees life as a sick, twisted, ironic joke, Blake is forced to act with sincerity and step out of his public persona when he perceives his life as the biggest joke of all. The Comedian is the only person in the room who understands the irony, and, as Kukkonen concludes, "the Comedian, the negativity-filled sensualist ends up with nothing but [regrets]" (Kukkonen 210). The pain of a rejected attempt at familial acceptance evidences a desire for normalcy in lifestyle that Blake's queer fetish for violence does not allow.

Aspects of the costumes of the three of the most prominent members of the minutemen—Captain Metropolis, Silk Spectre I, and Nite Owl I—recreate some aspects of the appearances of prominent members of DC's Justice League, including Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman. The vibrant red, blue, and yellow of Captain Metropolis' costume make him stand out as a leader, likening his role in founding the minutemen and attempt to found the Crimebusters to Superman's sustained level of leadership in the Justice League. These similarities are additionally evidenced by Captain Metropolis sharing a name

with the fictitious city under Superman's protection in DC comics. However, Gardner's implied purity by comparison to Superman is corrupted by his homosexuality and apparent racism. The display of upper leg and garter in Sally Jupiter's Silk Spectre costume mirrors Wonder Woman's appearance, and the display of female empowerment in Jupiter's Silk Spectre persona reflects the feminism of Wonder Woman. The persona and costume of Mason's Nite Owl, including the name, calls Batman to mind. The similarities between characters support a reading of Mason acting as a heteronormative foil to Gardner and Jupiter as Batman acts as a skeptical, sometimes dark foil to Superman and Wonder Woman.

The first Nite Owl, Hollis Mason, is called to heroism more so by altruism than social or sexual deviancy. Mason is marked heteronormative by a Superman comic's "no hint of repressed sex urge" appealing to his heroic qualities, and by his role as a police officer (Moore, "Under the Hood," 6). This reading is corroborated by "What's so Goddamned Funny?" in that Kukkonen views first Nite Owl Hollis Mason as the only masked hero who does not have a sexual element associated with crime-fighting. This essay treats the text moralistically, claiming, "[out] of the costumed avengers, perhaps only the first Nite Owl would count as a do-gooder in the true sense, neither acting out a personal kink or power fantasy" (Kukkonen 205). If Mason is the only crime-fighter not acting out a personal kink, he stands as a foil to the varying sexuality and sexual deviancy of his colleagues. Mason writes, "Some of us did it for because we were hired to and some of us did it to gain publicity," about his heroic colleagues, and, "Some of us did it out of a sense of childlike excitement and some of us, I think, did it for a kind of excitement that was altogether more adult and less healthy" (Moore, "Under the Hood," 8). "Power fantasy" and "unhealthy adult excitement" are especially referential to Comedian Edward Blake. As Blake's mantle of the Comedian implies, Blake alludes to the Joker, Batman's iconic clownish antagonist, in the same way that the minutemen call members of the Justice League to mind. Blake shares the

queer element of heroism with several fellow minutemen, yet has nefarious kinks and fantasies himself, such as acts of sexual violence. These cause the Comedian to be removed from the minutemen, reflecting villainy and thus further characterizing him as a similar figure to the Joker.

The six major characters of the second generation are based on six prominent characters from Charlton Comics, a failed publisher from the silver age of comics which DC acquired shortly before the release of *Watchmen*. The would-be ensemble are dark recreations of Charlton's superhero ensemble, and their dark, faded costumes represent their fading influence on a dark world. This is a far departure from the bright, abundant use of primary colors in the Minutemen.

Watchmen's second generation of superheroes serve an entirely different narrative role than the first generation as well, which is immediately evident in an examination of the changed political climate that these characters must exist in. When Captain Metropolis calls for the remaining active ex-minutemen, himself and The Comedian, to form a group called the crimebusters alongside the five emerging superheroes of the second generation, the Comedian's attitude sparks tensions between characters which prevents the next generation from ever working as one cohesive unit. Not only do they not have the explicit support of one another, or indeed the element of publicity control that Schexnayder brought to the minutemen, the would-be crimebusters must deal with increasing negative publicity directed towards vigilantes as a group.

After the police strike riots, the government passes the Keene act, which outlaws any masked crime-fighting not sanctioned by the American government. Because the fictional public is also evidently aware of the queer nature of masked crime-fighting, the 1977 Keene act mirrors real-world anti-gay sentiment of the late 70's and 80's. An additional factor contributing the successful passing of the Keene act was doubtlessly the arrival of Doctor

Manhattan, the only character in *Watchmen* with any sort of beyond-human powers.

Although Manhattan's powers are somewhat vague, they are certainly vast, and his existence allows for advances in science and technology with the help of former masked crime-fighter Adrian Veidt, American dominance in the Cold War and the War in Vietnam, and the lack of a need for other super-heroic protectors. Doctor Manhattan's arrival is arguably the most consequential event in the alternative historical timeline of the *Watchmen* universe, but it was also a physical transformation of the character with lasting emotional resonances.

Jon Osterman, otherwise known as Doctor Manhattan after suffering a terrible accident, begins to lose touch with humanity. This loss of human interest is veritably accompanied by a loss in romantic interest. Osterman expresses his fading ties to the world clearly before using his powers to leave Earth altogether. "I am tired of the world; these people," he narrates, "tired of being caught in the tangle of their lives" (Moore Ch. IV 25). Flashbacks show Osterman engaging in a healthy (heteronormative) relationship with a woman named Janie Slater before the accident, which establishes that Osterman was fully capable of emotion at one point. The heteronormativity of this relationship is evidenced by traditionally heteronormative courtship, such as sharing beers and flirting, visiting an amusement park, and of course heterosexual intercourse (Moore Ch. IV 5-7). During the Vietnam war, The Comedian observes that Doctor Manhattan is losing touch with humanity. Adrian Veidt makes a similar observation, but gives credit to his godly status, likening his relationship with humans to that between humans and ants. This observation is additionally supported by the writings of Professor Milton Glass, who is responsible for examining Manhattan's powers in-universe, and on one occasion refers to Doctor Manhattan as god. In *Watchmen as Literature*, Sarah Van Ness posits that although Manhattan's transformation gave him immense power, "[he] has no power to change his present state and seems to have no control over the change in his now otherworldly view of life on Earth" (Van Ness 87).

When Jon Osterman leaves Janie Slater for Laurie Juspecky, it suggests his need for sustained romantic interest, and displays his willingness to become sexually involved with Laurie, a younger woman, to sustain his desire for interest in romance.

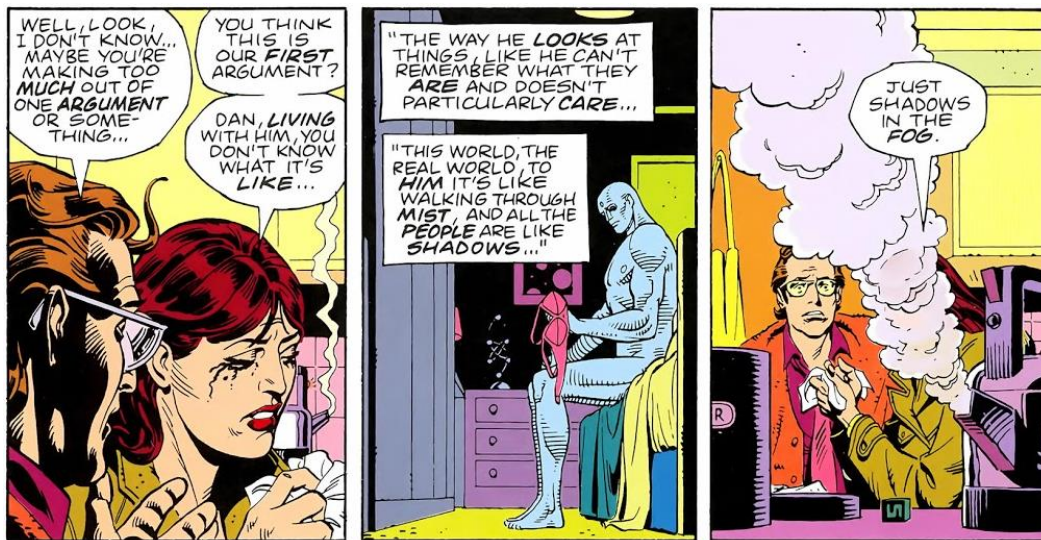
After the accident, Jon's physical appearance is irreparably changed, to the point where his new look equates to a permanent mask. Apparent from numerous other characters, the mask can provide an alternative sexual identity. As Doctor Manhattan, Jon is the only character with powers, but the distinction of his new physical form and level of godlike power from that of a regular human causes him to lose touch with humanity. By 1985, Jon has become so robotic that he doesn't know what stimulates Laurie anymore.

"Phenomenology, Embodiment and the Political Efficacy of Contingent Identity Claims" by Annabelle Willox in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory* examines phenomenology as it relates to trans and gender issues. There is no marked trans character in *Watchmen*; however, the terms in which Willox describes bodies elucidates the post-transformative nature of Dr. Manhattan. According to her, bodily alienation occurs "when the subject perceives its own body as an object rather than as its viewpoint" (Willox 102). Moreover, Manhattan's propensity to exist in multiple bodies and his ability to survive complete bodily annihilation suggest that he exists more as an entity than an inhabitant of his body. Willox also asserts that objects may become part of the body image, which has numerous applications to the costumes of other characters. This especially reflects the extremity of Manhattan's lack of "body-for-itself" when he changes his body image to include a symbol on his forehead for the sake of propaganda, and when he makes himself bluer for television. Because Manhattan can be seen to lack the power to return to his more human existence as Jon Osterman, and sees his new body as an object, Manhattan is therein alienated from his body. This alienation is a perpetually queering phenomenological disorientation.

After his transformation into Doctor Manhattan, Osterman becomes disoriented from his own sexuality in the same sense in which he is disoriented from his body. Doctor Manhattan perceives things in terms of atoms, which suggests that he is now less than human in some way. In *Watchmen*'s third chapter, Manhattan creates duplicates of himself to engage Laurie Juspecky sexually while he continues working on a science project in the other room. Juspecky considers this a sexual transgression, which causes her to leave Manhattan. This lovemaking scene culminates with Manhattan admitting to Juspecky, "I don't know what stimulates you any-more," and begins with the transition, "I could not love her as she had loved me," which corroborates a reading of Osterman being estranged from sex by his new identity (Moore, Ch. 3, 4). Doctor Manhattan would like to engage in sexuality more than his now fleeting humanity will allow. This is additionally evidenced by Slater's description of Osterman after they broke up, saying he, "[knows] how every damn thing in this world fits together except people... He couldn't relate to me. Not emotionally. Certainly not sexually" (Moore, Ch. 3, 5-6). Although Manhattan would like to relate to normative conceptions of sexuality, asexual tendencies are intrinsic to his new body, and Manhattan is unsuccessful in fighting against his own nature.

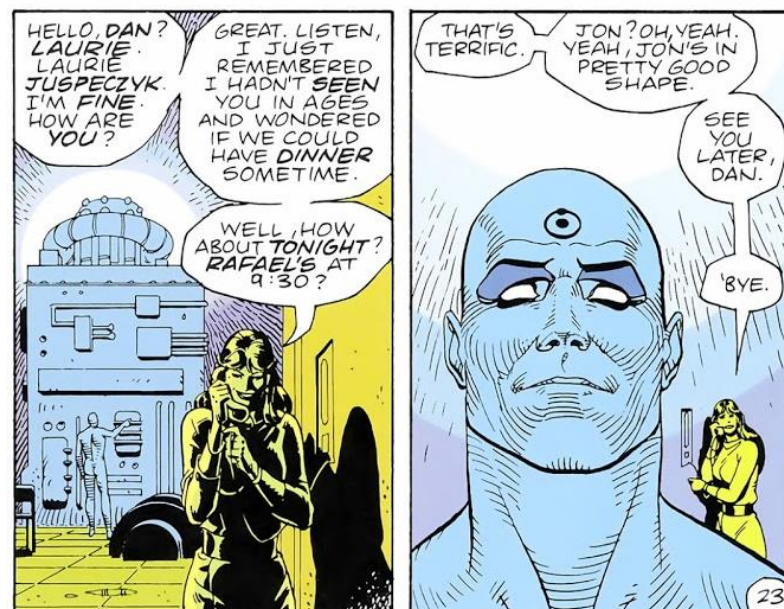
The idea of known infidelity is also significant to an understanding of Doctor Manhattan's sexuality. Cuckoldry is mentioned specifically in the first installment of "Under the Hood," when the wife of a man named Moe Vernon cheats on him with one of his employees. Hollis Mason knew Vernon from the auto repair shop, and totes this story as the saddest story that he knows, as Vernon kills himself shortly after this case of infidelity. Vernon is unattractive and wears a bra around his office for comedic effect, and because Vernon is wearing a bra when he discovers his wife is cheating, the pink bra becomes a symbol for sexual confusion and frustration. This motif reoccurs when Doctor Manhattan is

seen holding a pink bra in one hand and clearly having no idea what its function is after failing to make love with Juspeczyk, which underscores his failures in relating to humans.



(Moore, Ch. III, 9)

This inability to relate culminates with Osterman telling Juspeczyk that she was the last thing in the world he was invested in before his departure from Earth. When Dreiberg and Juspeczyk make dinner plans in the first chapter, Manhattan looks on knowingly:



(Moore, Ch. I, 23)

When this occurs, Manhattan smiles the same smile as when he views their sleeping naked bodies in chapter XII. A distorted sense of time is within the realm of Doctor Manhattan's superhuman powers: "I can't prevent the future," he comments, "to me, it's already happening" (Moore, Ch. IV, 16). Considering Jon's perception of time, this smile is likely a knowing smile, and the upturned corners of his mouth convey the bittersweet emotion of a love lost:



(Moore, Ch. XII, 25)

It is at this point when Osterman realizes himself as an aromantic, and can now feel glad that Laurie has found someone who she can be happy with. The story of Moe Vernon serves as an allegory for Dr. Manhattan's character and sexuality, which provides an additional lens under which Manhattan reads as a queer character.

Following in the footsteps of first Nite Owl Hollis Mason, Nite Owl Dan Dreiberg proves to be a more sexually complex character. A minutemen fan turned hero, Dreiberg passively suffered retirement because of the Keene Act. His relationship with Laurie Juspechzyk is also characterized by his passivity, exhibited when he hesitates to invite her over even though he wants to, and agrees that their days as vigilantes were silly even though he enjoyed them. According to Van Ness, when Dreiberg is in retirement, "the empty garments hold more authority than the man who once wore them," which asserts the significance of

costume and identity to his poise (Van Ness 109). Images reflect the significance of Dreiberg's Nite Owl costume to his character, and a dream sequence shows him having his naked flesh stripped off to reveal his costume underneath. Dreiberg then "disrobes" a past love who stands naked before him to reveal Laurie Juspeczyk in her Silk Spectre costume underneath:



(Moore, Ch. VII, 16; Ch. I, 13)

This dream sequence reifies the idea that Dreiberg's costume and alter ego are critical components of his sexual identity. However, the most prominent display of Dreiberg's lack of confidence is his inability to perform with Juspeczyk, in which the flaccid phallus is symbolic for his character. When Dreiberg and Juspeczyk reassume their respective mantles

of Nite Owl and Silk Spectre, he says, “I feel so confident, it’s like I’m on fire” (Moore Ch. VII 28). Van Ness also elucidates that one meaning of “masked adventurer” is one who adventures for personal gain, which fits the case of Dreiberg. It is true that Dreiberg became a crime-fighter to find a sense of belonging, and that his costume enables him to be a more confident person. After their first mission together as a team, “[not] only were Dreiberg’s sexual inhibitions lowered, but so too were any feelings of doubt related to his costumed adventuring” (Van Ness 154). Along with his confidence problem, Dreiberg and Juspezyk’s post-heroic love making scene shows his impotence problem to be solved as well. Juspezyk asks him if the costumes helped, and he responds that they did, saying, “I guess the costumes had something to do with it. It just feels strange, you know? To come out and admit that to somebody. To come out of the closet” (Moore Ch. VII, 28). Dreiberg is clearly aware on some level that his alter ego of Nite Owl influences his sexuality, and the mention of coming out of the closet shows that he views himself as queer. Therein, Dreiberg is using the role of Nite Owl to sexually stimulate himself, in some sense.

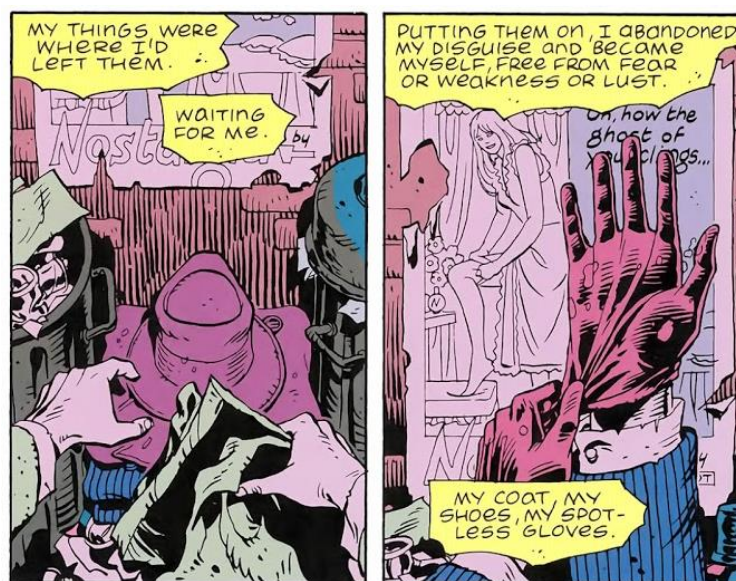
Despite her queer parents and queer relationships, second Silk Spectre Laurie Juspezyk reads as a heteronormative foil to the queer element of masked crime-fighting in *Watchmen*, as does Hollis Mason. While Mason is motivated by altruism to fight crime and Blake is motivated by deviancy, the other characters who read as queer are motivated by some combination of the two. Juspezyk, on the other hand, becomes the Silk Spectre because it was forced upon her by her mother, first Silk Spectre Sally Juspezyk. In a phone conversation with Hollis, Sally confirms, “[Laurie] hated adventuring!” (Moore, Ch. VIII, 1). This is supported by a conversation between Dan and Laurie in *Watchmen*’s first chapter, in which Juspezyk tells Dreiberg she thinks her costume was “dreadful,” questions why she ever dressed up to fight crime, and asserts that forced retirement because of the Keene Act was for the best. Here, Juspezyk describes adventuring as, “running around in a stupid

costume because my stupid mother wanted me to” (Moore, Ch. I, 25). Dreiberg’s passive agreement and implicit desire to return to his role of Nite Owl makes the foil between these two characters especially stark in this scene. After Juspeczyk’s return to masked crime-fighting, she comes to represent an entirely different brand of feminism than her mother. In Laurie Juspeczyk’s final appearance in the comic, she says she wants a “better costume, something that protects [her]” (Moore, Ch. XII, 30). This shows that she does not share Sally’s overt presentation of sexuality, and feels the need for a more individualistic branding. Also, this further emphasizes the importance of the costume as an item of queer significance in *Watchmen* by depicting a heteronormative character who fails to fit into a queer presentation of sexuality.

Rorschach reads as queer insofar as he is completely estranged from his own sexuality. Rorschach uses his costumed identity to perpetuate his anti-sexual tendencies, and fits Hollis Mason’s description of a social deviant or aberration perfectly. The childhood experiences of Rorschach contribute to his formation of a disgust with sex, and exemplify the ways in which his asexuality manifests itself. Walter Kovaks, a troubled child who will eventually become Rorschach, was raised by his mother, a professional prostitute. In one instance, he walks in on his mom having sex for money after overhearing her tell her partner that he was hurting her. This instance shows Rorschach’s estrangement from sexuality beginning at a young age, and presents an example of a young Rorschach exhibiting an altruistic desire to help those in need. Also, Rorschach sees a troubling image of two people having sex in a dream, which shows he may fear sex, and is certainly disgusted by it. Rorschach equates sexuality to sin, which is evidenced by his low opinion of his mother, his conception of lust, and his misogynistic word choice— often referring to women as whores. He also condemns sexuality in others based on his own discomfort in it. Upon viewing sexually suggestive graffiti, he uses the word “indulging” to describe what he views to

possibly be an act of sexual foreplay, and comments, “didn’t like it. Makes doorway look haunted” (Moore Ch. V 11). Although Walter Kovaks matured into a state of sexual confusion, he lapses into a comfortable worldview of sexuality by assuming the role of Rorschach.

To Rorschach, the role of Rorschach is more real than the role of Walter Kovaks. When he puts on his costume (which he calls his uniform) he becomes “free from fear or weakness of lust,” which clearly shows his self-imposed standards for heroism:



(Moore Ch. V, 18)

Rorschach's costume includes an eyeless, amorphous, black-and-white mask, the colors of which clearly represent the black and white of Rorschach's worldview. Film essayist Evan Torner posits that Rorschach's "lack-of-gaze constitutes an asexualizing trope," in *Sexual Ideology in the Works of Alan Moore*, especially considering other asexual comic icons without gaze (Torner 120). This further supports the idea that costumes reflect the queer nature of their wearers. Therein, Kovaks reads as an asexual character whose life circumstances have polarized him to a state of anti-sexuality just as the circumstances of the world around him polarized him to fight crime. Further, both his desire to enact justice and his anti-desire to enact sexuality are fulfilled by the alter-ego of Rorschach.

Queer Phenomenology presents a cross-section in queer theory and phenomenology, which elucidates the idea of queering objects. Insofar as superhero costumes are objects, the orientation of *Watchmen* characters towards that object reflects queerness. This supports the idea of Nite Owl's costume granting him sexual efficacy, Rorschach's change in costume enabling a shift in his desires, and Doctor Manhattan's growing affinity for nudity reflecting his deteriorating sense of sociability. According to Sara Ahmed, "bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space," and are oriented by (straight) lines pointing them towards desire as well as "queer" deviations from supposed (hetero)normativity (Ahmed 67). This definition allows for marked heterosexual characters like Dreiberg and Blake to be considered queer insofar as their desires orient them in a direction that deviates from normativity. Ahmed suggests that the queer can come to be at odds with the phenomenologically "orientated" space of the home, which reflects Kukkonen's reading of Blake's exile from the familial sphere. According to Ahmed, disorientation/reorientation is a "turn." Rorschach's character undergoes two identifiable "turns:" once when he becomes Rorschach for the first time, and the again after he is released from prison. Rorschach's first shift marks the time when he begins to consider his mask his true face, therein displaying a

change in the orientation of his desires to be completely free from sex. Notably, Kovaks performed heroism as Rorschach before becoming Rorschach in totality: “it was Kovaks who closed his eyes” at the time of Rorschach’s first turn, and “it was Rorschach who opened them again” (Moore, Ch. VI, 21). Rorschach entrenches his perspective on society and justice at this time, and the specific reference to eyes implies a variance in Rorschach’s gaze that reads as asexualizing and aromanticizing.

The second shift is a result of the time spent in prison without his mask on, and represents a notable softening in his orientation. When Rorschach escapes from prison he must wear the older, dirtier version of his uniform from before his first turn, which indicates a change in his phenomenological orientation accordingly. “Utopia Achieved” essayist Peter Paik posits that this is the only point in time, “in which the expression on Rorschach’s face is something other than the dull, blank expression of benumbed indifference or the stare of murderous fury... Rorschach instead regards with an almost gentle look” (Paik 58-59). Rorschach is still able to function as Rorschach in his old uniform; however, he undergoes a step away from anti-romantic asexuality at this point in the narrative. It is also at this point in which Rorschach engages Dreiberg in a handshake that clearly lasts for longer than Dreiberg is comfortable:



(Moore, Ch. X, 11)

Because of Rorschach's misogynistic tendencies, it stands to reason that if he had a romantic attraction it would be towards men. The phenomenological turns in Rorschach's costume also suggests that a homoromantic attraction would be most evident at this point in his narrative, and Rorschach's trust in Nite Owl after their years of working together suggest that Dreiberg would be the object of these affections. Torner calls this handshake, "mildly homoerotic," in a way that, "expresses his platonic feelings for his friend without crossing a semantic boundary of implied sexual attraction" (Torner 121). Alongside Rorschach's blatant misogyny, this scene evidences that Rorschach has a same-sex romantic attraction, and that Dreiberg momentarily becomes the object of his affection. Unfortunately, Rorschach's narrative concludes with his death before the long-term effects of his second shift can be observed.

Insofar as *Watchmen* is a deconstruction of the superhero genre, the phenomenological implications of heroic costumes, masks, and alter egos complicate the ways in which the characters of *Watchmen* enact sexuality. For Rorschach, having a costume and alter ego allows him to create a space where sexuality is vile and corruptive. For Doctor Manhattan, a new physical image presents an inescapable queer disorientation. In the case of Dan Dreiberg, the Nite Owl costume acts as an outlet for him to find sexual gratification in a way that is akin to enacting role play. Edward Blake's hypersexuality and desire for sexual violence are enabled by his persona of the Comedian and role as a super-soldier with the US government; Sally Jupiter's hypersexuality and desire to be sexually wanted are enabled by her persona of Silk Spectre and the publicity generated by Larry Schexnayder. Jupiter's rejection of Schexnayder in favor of Blake indicates her lust for sustained sexual desire to be shown towards her, and elucidates the role of the pair as a queer couple in the text. Instances of homosexual non-normative sexuality among minor *Watchmen* characters, such as the

Silhouette, Hooded Justice, and Captain Metropolis indicate that a reading of queer sexualities amongst *Watchmen* characters is appropriate. Deviant, non-normative, or otherwise queer traits are additionally highlighted by the inclusion of one marked heteronormative character in each generation of so-called heroes: first Nite Owl Hollis Mason and second Silk Spectre Laurie Juspecky. The public outcry against masked crimefighting in the fictional *Watchmen* universe hampers the expression of sexuality for many characters, with specific implications of the idea of the closet. As masked alter egos are intertwined with heroic costumes, any change in appearance or costume presents a phenomenological variance in sexual orientation. Numerous *Watchmen* characters hold non-normative sexual identities, and instances of homosexuality, personal kinks and fetishes, sexual transgressions, bodily alienation, and overt disgust with sexuality demonstrate the ways in which queer theory applies to *Watchmen*.

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